



GUATEMALA MEDICAL MISSION: REFLECTIONS OF AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the experiences of an international student participating in an interprofessional medical mission in Guatemala. The main purpose of this paper is to share the experiences and critical reflections of the author with the hope of inspiring other international students to consider participating in a similar service learning experience. The author used the Content Analysis approach to analyze personal reflections on the various events experienced throughout the trip. The five themes, desire for the trip, culture, practical experiences, reflections and relationships, are explored and elaborated in this paper. Although these emerged themes are based on the author's personal experiences and reflections, they may be generalized to other international students.

Keywords: reflections, international student, medical mission, interprofessional

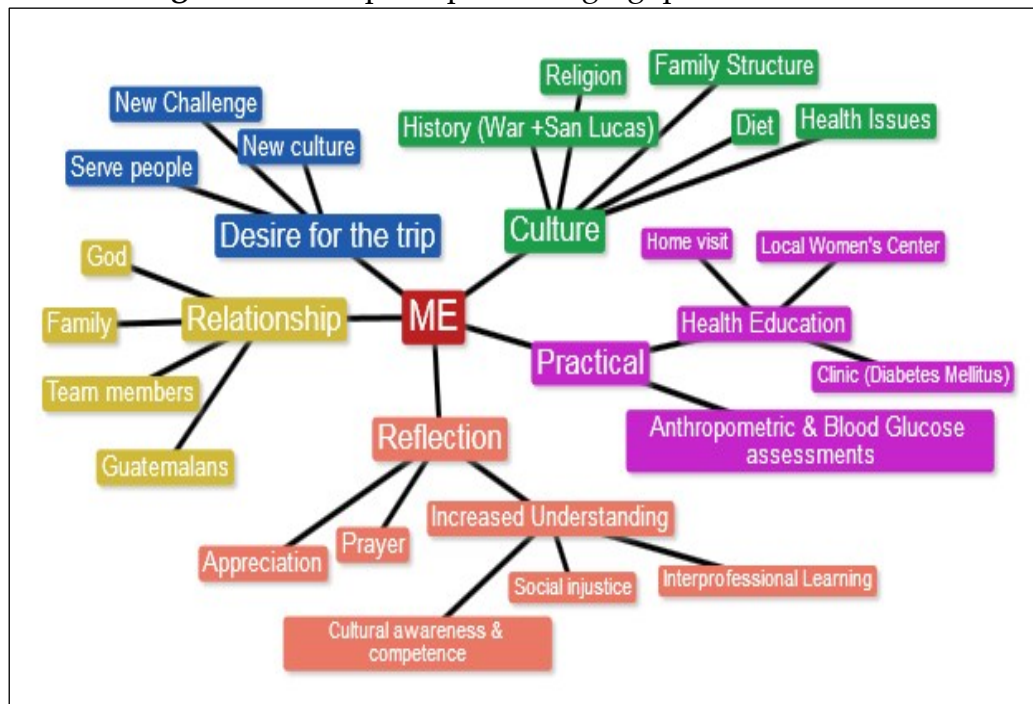
1. Introduction

As a doctoral student at Marywood University, I had the opportunity to serve on an international medical mission organized by the University. We traveled to San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala which lies on the shores of Lake Atitlan. Our interprofessional team included three advisors and 10 students from various healthcare disciplines. We had the privilege to learn and be a part of the Children in Crisis Initiative and the Health Promoters Programs (Gorlick, 2010). Our team performed various healthcare and community activities that helped us build lasting relationships. I added diversity to my group not only because I was the only international student on the team, but also because my past experiences were very different compared to my team members. The purpose of this paper is to share my reflections about my medical mission experience as

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an international student with the intention of encouraging other international students to consider participation in similar service learning experiences.

Figure 1: Concept map of emerging qualitative themes



Each day of the trip I logged my daily activities and personal reflections in a journal. I then created a reflection paper summarizing both components of the journal. From that paper, I used the Content Analysis approach to analyze the narrative data compiled in the paper and to identify themes (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). The analysis showed the emergence of the following themes that will further be elaborated in this article: desire for the trip, culture, practical experiences, reflections, and relationships (Figure 1).

The desire or motivation is the driving force to perform any given activity. My main desire for this trip was to serve people who are underserved and suffer social injustice and to build relationships. My desire was also fueled by my experience as an international student. I still remember the adaptation phase of my initial years in the US when I adapted to and experienced the different social norms, educational system, food and culture of the US. Although it was very challenging, I learned a great deal from it. It was because of this, I wanted to experience a 'new' culture and, in a way, relive that adaptation. I also love adventures and this seemed like a perfect challenge in which I could enhance the team's experience with my unique background. These were some of my driving factors. And, although I understand not everyone has the same motivations, I assure you that volunteering in such a trip will be worthwhile and satisfying.

The second theme that emerged from the analysis was culture with several sub-categories including the civil history of Guatemala and San Lucas Toliman, the religiosity of the people, family life, and the diet. Guatemala won its independence from Spain in 1821. Then, there was a 36 year long civil war between the military and the

guerrillas which ended in 1996 (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 2015). The damage and aftermaths of the war are still widely seen in the form of unemployment and poverty rates and lack of education, healthcare, clean water, and sanitation. These social/structural problems lead to numerous health problems, including malnutrition. Being from India, I could relate to the Guatemalan history and issues and it highly increased my feeling of patriotism. I have never personally experienced any civil or international war, however, I have heard stories from my grandparents about the freedom fights in India and how we won our independence in 1947 from the British (CIA, 2015). India is still recovering from the damage even after 70+ years of independence; similar to the recovery occurring in Guatemala.

In San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala there are approximately 20,000 people, the majority of whom are indigenous Mayans (Friends of San Lucas, 2015). Along with the indigenous Mayan beliefs, the most prevalent religion among the people of Guatemala is Christianity (CIA, 2015). During the trip, I had the opportunity to witness a Mass spoken in Spanish and a Lenten procession. Although I do not understand the Spanish language, the atmosphere was especially calming. I have never seen such a strong sense and presentation of spirituality in people; it was an amazing experience. I also noted that the people had a great appreciation of community and togetherness. In preparation of my service in Guatemala, I viewed a few documentary films (see reference section for listing) depicting the real challenges faced by the community and the overall family life in the country. However, seeing the closeness between people in real life and how they support themselves and their neighbors was incredible. It reminded me of my family and my community in India and made me realize that relationships are of utmost importance and should be nurtured and maintained.

Although we visited several villages in the surrounding area as part of our service, our home base was San Lucas Toliman. The Friends of San Lucas Mission took care of our accommodations, travel, and food (Friends of San Lucas, 2015). Local Guatemalan women cooked and served us many traditional dishes as well as the staple foods of the region including corn tortillas, rice, and beans. Though the food was delicious, I realized that it was also a contributing factor of several health issues among the population such as malnutrition, protein deficiency, hypertension, and diabetes.

Some of the main activities we performed were providing nutrition education through home visits in the rural areas of San Lucas Toliman; conducting anthropometric assessments of children at a makeshift clinic; providing an educational presentation and gathering anthropometric and blood glucose data at a clinic specifically dedicated to caring for people diagnosed with Diabetes Mellitus (DM); and giving a health promotion talk about infant and child nutrition at a local Women's Center.

For the home visits, our team was further divided into smaller groups of one faculty advisor, three students and a Health Promoter. We visited approximately eight families with children who were classified, through the Children in Crisis Initiative Program, as having either stage two or three malnutrition. We cultivated relationships with the family members by listening to their stories, understanding their needs and

providing medical advice based on the issues they shared with us. We performed height and weight assessments of children between 0-5 years of age in the Children in Crisis Initiative Program at a home, which was temporarily converted to a clinic for that day. We also provided them with the traditional Guatemalan drink Atole, which was a way of persuading the mothers to bring their children in for measurements. The Health Promoters provided the mothers health education using visual materials and answered all questions the mothers voiced. The record keeping for each child included growth charts and was very comprehensive and impressive (Brady et al., 2015).

In addition to this service, we provided several health promotion talks on various topics such as DM, breastfeeding, recipe suggestions, sanitation, and child growth and development. Our goal as a team on this mission was not to cure the problems of the community overnight and leave, but to build lasting relationships with the community by being present with them, learning from them, and empowering them by providing education. These activities led to interprofessional learning as the team members were from different health professions. We learned from each other and collaborated our ideas to provide the best service to the Guatemalans.

Every evening of the trip we had a group reflection session. We prayed, expressed appreciations, shared our views and thoughts on the activities that were performed that day, and revealed how we were processing our experiences. All the events during the trip, including these reflection sessions, significantly influenced me on a personal and professional level. It would be difficult to include every detail in this article, so I am focusing on only certain aspects. One of the benefits of these deliberations was that it improved my relationships; my relationship with God, my family, my team members, and the Guatemalan community. Not only did the activities restore my faith in God, they also resulted in a deeper appreciation of my culture, country and family.

Prior to this trip, I was nervous about being with my team members. I felt I would not be able to connect with them because of our different backgrounds; however, I was wrong. We all faced similar situations and barriers, including a language barrier, which allowed us to support each other throughout and created an everlasting bond among us. We were all respectful of each other and this made our relationship stronger. I am specifically sharing this because I understand that like me, other international students may be anxious or nervous about 'fitting' in with a group. But, let me reassure you, it is probable that the other members of the group are nervous about the same thing. Once you break the ice, share a little about yourself, and connect to your team, your relationship and experience will become a memorable one.

The trip and reflections also increased my overall appreciation for my safe haven, good education, relationships, job opportunities, and all the basic amenities that I have taken for granted. Listening to the personal stories of the Guatemalans humbled me. It increased my understanding of social injustice and the importance of cultural awareness and competence, especially being a healthcare professional.

This medical mission experience has been a life-changing event for me. It has helped me build lifetime friends and memories and has made me even more grateful

for everything that I have been provided. My cultural competence, empathy, and humility towards others were also significantly enhanced. I hope reading my reflections will motivate other international students to consider volunteering for similar service learning trips so they can also experience these and other benefits.

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